

The New Ethnicity:
Some Observations
on its Social and Cultural Implications

delivered by

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Tonight I would like to talk to you about the social and cultural implications of the so-called "New Ethnicity" for us as the children and grandchildren of immigrants, for us as Poles, and, most importantly, for us as Americans. Until very recently, the image of who or what we were and what we should be was set for us and other immigrants by the needs, hopes, fears, and expectations of American Society. Although welcomed by some for their labor, our parents and grandparents and other immigrants were seen as a threat by many Americans. They were denounced in the vilest possible terms...the "ragtag and bobtailed cut throats of Beelzubub" as one respectable newspaper editor called them. They were seen as anti-democratic morons, as strike breakers coming to take jobs from honest Americans, as the advance guard of Anarchism and later Bolshevism and the mindless robots of the Pope's plot to take over Protestant America. Some Americans, emboldened by these images, felt free to beat, kill, cheat, and discriminate against them. Even the American Catholic Church regarded them as half pagan barbarians.

As the years went by, it turned out that the Polish immigrant was less dangerous than the Americans had supposed and he could be allowed to slip silently into that melting pot which many Americans so fervently hoped actually existed. During the great outpouring of Patriotism and the tremendous pressure for conformity during and after World War II, the image of the Polish Immigrant was transformed in accord with the new needs of American Society. He became the kindly, gentle, slightly comic fellow, who with his citizenship papers clutched reverently in his work-hardened hands, burred heart warming, patriotic cliches in his broken, night school English. Our concern with freedom, independence, and justice for Poland after World War II was subsumed into the American Anti-Communist Crusade. While the

American nation struggled to redefine its identity and its role in the post war world at center stage, our role in the tableau was to stand in the corner marked "captive nation" as an example of some of the noble sons of freedom who needed saving. Our presence served to justify and legitimize that crusade. As satisfying as all of that may have been to Americans, it did not result in independence for Poland or the roll back of communism in Eastern Europe, in spite of the rhetoric. When it came down to the crunch, American interests in Eastern Europe turned out to be quite secondary.

At the same time, the immigrant was forced by an increasing pressure in the schools, in the churches, in the factories, and in the society in general to give up his funny foreign ways and became a good Anglo-Saxon. Since it was often linked to material success and social mobility, there was a tremendous pressure for conformity. For example, as early as 1915 Henry Ford, whose views were the epitome of the "American" philosophy, paid his famous \$5.00 a day only to people who conformed to proper standards of behavior as certified by inspectors--i.e., people who lived like middle class American Protestants. Ford even ran a virtually compulsory school for Americanization of his workers. His school had an unique graduation ceremony. Let me read you an account of it from the Archives of the Ford Motor Company:

Not long ago this school graduated over 500 men. Commencement exercises were held in the largest hall in the city. On the stage was represented an immigrant ship. In front of it was a huge melting pot. Down the gang plank came the members of the class dressed in their national garbs and carrying luggage such as they carried when they

landed in this country. Down they poured into the Ford Melting Pot and disappeared. Then, the teachers began to stir the contents of the pot with long ladles. Presently, the pot began to boil over and out came the men dressed in their best American clothes and waving American flags.

That's a peculiar pot--no matter what ingredients you put in, it only cooks one dish. As corny as it was, Henry Ford's graduation ceremony illustrates what the Melting Pot meant to Americans--not the fusion of various cultures into a new amalgam, but the total assimilation of immigrants into Anglo-Saxon Society.

In the 1960's, our image changed. We got a new version of our old role to play--we were the heavies again. The Cold War was receding and all that "captive nations" stuff was an embarrassment in the Age of Detente. The country was beset by racial difficulties and was getting more and more deeply mired in that terrible and confusing war in Vietnam. What was to blame for this appalling state of affairs? It was the immigrant and his children who, it was now discovered had failed to melt properly into good Americans. These people had become the hard hat, chauvinist, racist ethnics. So it was we who were responsible for Racism. Integration was being held back by us. I might point out that whatever other function it has, and it has many, integration for both blacks and ethnics is after all a new version of the melting pot, which if successful, would lead to the destruction of all ethnic groups. We were also responsible for keeping the United States in Vietnam and for helping to suppress the legitimate aspirations of oppressed colonial peoples in Southeast Asia. Since blacks were no longer willing to play scapegoat and buffoon, the racists turned on us. On top of everything else, we had to endure the so-called "Polack joke" from the bigots.

Those images projected on us by Americans over the years were either untrue or distorted our real attitudes, hopes, fears, and aspirations. We lived out our joys and tragedies under the very nose of American Society, but it looked at us with eyes that did not see and with a mind that refused to comprehend. The differences in the way we played and prayed and lived, the thousands of different assumptions we made about the world and the way things happen in it were not supposed to exist in the country of the Melting Pot. Like the embarrassing guest at the party, we were politely ignored in the history books and in the media, in the hopes that we would behave like everyone else, or just go away. The pressure on our people to deny their identity and their heritage was always heavy. As much as we owe this country for the haven and opportunities it offered, we paid a terrible price in alienation, self-doubt and self-hate. Recently, a first grade teacher in Minnesota told me that on her first day in class as she called the roll, she came across a name whose origin she couldn't immediately identify. She asked the child her nationality. The child nervously and defensively answered: "I'm Polish, but I'm not dumb." She turned out to be the brightest child in the room. Perhaps we can understand better than most people what the blacks are talking about when they point to the impact of racism on children's self-image.

Many of our brethren succumbed to this pressure. They denied their identity, changed their names and tried to buy and barbeque their way into American life. Most of us, at least bent under the pressure of the carrot and the stick. We lived in a culture that denied validity to some of the deepest and most meaningful aspects of our own experience and enshrined instead those experiences, rituals, and myths which were not ours. This forced us to carry--consciously or unconsciously--the curse of the outsider--the

feeling that we did not truly belong. To this day we salute the flag faster and say the Pledge of Allegiance more fervently than others and hope that no one will ask what we are doing here or whether or not we really belong.

The fear of being exposed dies hard. It gripped us again when we came under attack in the 1960's. People said: "You are a bunch of racists"

And we answered: "But we are loyal"

People said: "You're dumb"

And we answered: "But we work hard and don't
cause trouble"

It often sounded as though we didn't understand the charge. But, in our way, we did. Implicit in all those charges and attacks, we thought we heard the real charge: "You are imposters." "You are outsiders." "You don't belong here." "You are not real Americans." Some of us became super American, to silence the doubt that according to the prevailing standard, we were not American enough. It is a tribute to the great resilience of our people that this social schizophrenia did not result in more personal dislocation than it did.

Imagine the descendents of those winged Hussars who swept the Turks off of the plains of Vienna...the great grandsons of Kosciuszko's grim reapers of death who charged the Russian guns with their farm implements at Raclawica... the grandsons of those implacable fighters whom Bismarck called the "General Staff of World Revolution"...the children of people who left home and crossed an ocean to a foreign land amidst great hardships in hopes of finding a better life...Imagine a people as lively, as unruly, as stubborn, as quarrelsome, as full of song and dance as the Poles...Imagine a people like that pretending that they were Ozzie and Harriet.

A decisive change also took place in our community in the mid-1960's. For a variety of reasons, ethnic consciousness and self-pride began to rise at that very time when the blacks broke the Anglo monopoly and made cultural diversity possible and respectable. It is now possible for us to define our own identity. But what is that identity? What does it mean to be a Polish American in Chicago, in America in 1974? And is that identity worth keeping? These are the questions we and every other ethnic group are going to have to ask ourselves.

Critics inside and outside our communities have insisted that these communities are, after all, only stunted versions of 19th century peasant villages in which we huddled together for support in those confusing early days, that they don't have any real purpose now, and that our churches reflecting the ethos of the community that built them, have no particular relevance or no special insights for 20th century urban life. Thus, our only reason for hanging together outside of habit and inertia is a nostalgia for auld lang syne and a common taste for kielbasa. There is, of course, a grain of truth in that analysis, but only a grain. Our communities are more vital and the heritage on which they draw is far richer and more dense than the critics would suggest. These communities are not fading and tattered remnants of European reality, but living and constantly changing entities founded by immigrant peoples as way of preserving, continuing, and developing those rituals, memories, traditions, and identities which provide the most basic meaning to human life and which enable us to make sense of the world. Ethnicity, an Italian friend of mine once remarked, is a way to get children born and the old buried. It is our task at this crucial, but very favorable, time to shape our communities for the 1970's and for the decades to come.

In order to do this, it is necessary to go back, relearn, and even re-think the meaning of our history in Europe and America--to understand what aspects of our Polish heritage we want to emphasize in the light of our American inheritance and to define against that background, our needs and those of the wider society in which we live. We may also have to forget some things. My colleague, the director of the Immigrant Archives, Rudi Vecoli, tells the story that during the 1919 Riot in Chicago, Italians on the near West side lynched a black. Shortly thereafter, Jane Addams called a meeting of Italian leaders. She asked them how it could be that the Italians, who had historical and friendly contacts with people of darker skin, and who had themselves been the victims of American lynch mobs, could display such hatred of blacks. One Italian remarked, "Ah, the young people are becoming Americans." If we have learned those aspects of Americanism, we should forget them.

We must be prepared, however, to defend our neighborhood and community with vigor, but without anger and hatred. The best way to defend them is go off of the defensive on which we have been far too long. Part of the reason for the anger and shrillness of our defense in the 1960's was that we felt that we were defending what no right to exist under the ground rules of the society. I think we can assert now and confidently that not only has our community a right to exist, but its existence is good. While we can not identify community totally with a geographical neighborhood and our challenge in the seventies must be to find new ways to strengthen the bonds of community in a time of increasing geographic dispersal, a territorial base is certainly important. I think we all realize those communities and those institutions which exist in the city cannot be easily recreated in the suburbs. I am not alone in believing that in an open, honest, and equitable way, a place can be made in the city for stable ethnic neighborhoods as well as for racially and ethnically

integrated ones. This can be best accomplished when the widest possible choice of housing is available to everyone to relieve the pressure caused by the obvious necessity of ensuring justice and equity. We cannot allow this solution to grow out racism or violence. Hate for any group--blacks, Jews, hippies--would devour our spirit and cripple our creativity and it would waste precious energy which we can use for better purposes. Secure in our identity and goals, I think we can, even in the face of unreasonable and unreasoning attacks against us, begin to develop the basis for an assault on the problems of urban life.

The political genius of our people was the ability to put together a viable and lasting commonwealth made up of peoples of diverse nationalities, races, and religions and to create it in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. Poland, you will remember, was a haven for religious and political refugees in which there was no organized religious repression or inquisition. . . and was it not a Pole who argued before all Christendom at the Council of Constance, that pagans and dissenters have rights and must not be deprived of life, liberty, or property because they profess a different faith? Drawing on this tradition and experience, we must take the lead in extending our hand and our leadership, if it is asked, to the other ethnic groups to form a coalition to work out mutually satisfactory solutions to the problems of crime, urban blight, poverty, and other corrosive problems which threaten our cities. This is no easy task and it must be done against the background of the tensions that arise between groups of people of widely differing life styles and cultures who are engaged in the intense everyday competition for jobs, status, services, rewards, and political power. It is our creative understanding of this aspect of our heritage that we may enable us to establish on the American urban scene the mechanisms

for adjusting, defusing, and adjudicating the disputes that will inevitably arise out of these tensions.

What else do we have to offer as a people, aside from our individual talents, to our country in this last third of the Twentieth Century? We can give America for the first time a full understanding of her own past. The history of the immigrant and his children has been as neglected as the history of the blacks. Part of the reason for the recent failures and our difficulties our country has suffered has been the erroneous conception Americans have had of themselves. We have generalized the experience of only a part of the people who make up the nation and have insisted that is American history. The attempt to try to solve the problems that beset us on the basis of this understanding has led to some unworkable and bizarre solutions. It is like trying to make a cake by using only half of the ingredients in the recipe. We can make a significant contribution to American as well as Polish history--since our experience is part of both--by beginning to study and interpret our life in the new world and then to teach it to our fellow Americans. In the process, we must go about the job of creating a genuine and mature Polish-American culture--a culture that does not live parasitically on either Polish or American Culture, but which draws creatively from both of them. What we must do in our daily lives as well as in all areas of modern literature, music, and art that we produce is to bring to bear creatively those special insights that are our heritage from the fusion of two deep, rich, and beautiful cultural traditions. Although we need not and perhaps must not confine the wisdom and grace of our heritage solely to Polish American themes there is a great need for our artists, writers, musicians, and scholars to explore these. They can help us to interpret through their insights the meaning of our sojourn in America.

We are also the ideal interpreters of the American Heritage to the people of Poland and vice-versa. As a middle man, we can bring the richly textured and profound culture of Poland to a United States which knows too

little of it. This means we may have to go beyond Chopin and Copernicus and learn it in depth ourselves. We must certainly present to America the culture of Modern Poland which shows the unmistakable signs of greatness in many areas in spite of--or perhaps because of--the repressive and bureaucratic system under which it must develop.

Micheal Novak noted in a recent article that there is a special conceit that many of our fellow Americans have. It is that their ancestors invented liberty and justice ; that democratic institutions are the result of a seeds planted in 1776 and since that date all we've had to do is to sit back and watch them grow. According to this view of American history, those of us who do not have British-American ancestors, are living on rent in someone else tradition. We are the beneficiaries--and presumably should be the humble and grateful beneficiaries--of someone else's ideals and sacrifices. My dear friends, that is nonsense. We can--and have--in the past pointed to that fact that Poland has parliamentary traditions as old and as venerable as those of any nation in the West and that hundreds of our brethren including Pulaski and Kosciuszko were "present at the Creation" (to borrow Dean Acheson's apt phrase) of the American Republic and they paid with their sacrifices, struggles and even with their lives for our share in this enterprise. But there is a deeper sense in which this view is wrong. One of the most distinguished, living American Historians Robert R. Palmer in his monumental two volume study called the Age of Democratic Revolution's has argued that between 1760 and 1800 there was an upsurge of revolutionary ideas and pressure for democratic institutions all over the Western World. However, there were only three countries in which the indigenous revolutionary movement was strong enough to achieve victory on its own after 1770--America, France and Poland. The first two succeeded as we all know.

Poland, in the midst of a massive and revolutionary transformation, was crushed by outside powers. We must not forget that we were charter members in that worldwide struggle for democracy that produced the American and French Revolutions and that people all over Europe saw Polish events as part of the universal movement. Remember the sorrowing words of the English poet, "and Freedom shrieked as Kosciuszko fell."

In a more immediate sense, however, we, our fellow immigrants, the browns and the blacks are as responsible for winning and preserving democracy in America as anyone else. Our parents and grandparents should also be numbered among the founders of the Republic. We can, of course, point to our strong participation in America's wars in this century--but perhaps we have pointed to that too often, not realizing how much more we have really contributed. It is, for all of its tragic cost, one of the less important of our contributions. There are more important positive things we have done. Our struggles for social and economic justice, our demands for human dignity for ourselves and others, our refusal to be treated as a machine or a thing, our support for democratic institutions and progressive legislation have brought progress and humanity to the American scene. It is through these struggles--some of them small and individual, others collective, monumental and national--that we have insured that the original heritage of our nation was maintained in integrity and that new dimensions were added to the meaning of liberty, justice and democracy. Remember freedom untested is freedom unwon--it is non-existent. As Mr. Novak has pointed out, it is the worker, the immigrant and the Black who have given meaning and reality to rights and liberties that some descendents of the original founding fathers would have denied us. It must be our goal in accord with our Polish and American heritage to continue to expand the

meaning of justice and democracy at a time when ominously powerful and wealthy forces in our society are threatening it and further to promote a society in which all can enjoy these blessings in security, health and prosperity.

Finally, we have something very valuable that we must retain and teach our fellow Americans. Post World War II America became, in the words of the titles of two books from our era, the world of the "Lonely Crowd" and a "Nation of Strangers." The demands of Modern Industrial Society more than ever are forcing masses of people to become migrants and rootless strangers. At first many found the world of ceaseless change and mobility exciting. It seemed to promise greater freedoms and expanded individuality. But soon people became dissatisfied and they began to hunger for roots, place and community. The Commune movement of 1960's was a search for those things--a search for what I believe, we, to a large degree, have preserved.

We know what it is to migrate and we also know from bitter experience how difficult it is to preserve spiritual and humane values in the face of the hostility, the new and bewildering situations, the despair, the loneliness and alienation that is the lot of the immigrant. We know how easy it is to lose your soul. But we have kept and expanded--with all of their imperfections to be sure--the sense of family; the importance of neighborhood and place; the desire, at all cost, to retain a human face to face dimension to life; and a determination to have at least one part of our world and identity solidly anchored so that we would not be swallowed up in the mad, protean whirlwind that is Modern America. I think we can teach our countrymen how to free themselves from the search for false identities in jobs, wealth, material possessions, and status; how to live by rhythms that are different than those of the machine. To a people whose lives have

been invaded by the fake, bloated, tawdry optimism of the world of advertising in which everyone is beautiful and happy and in which there is little pain, sickness or death, we can show that we have not yet lost a sense of life and death, of joy and tragedy enjoyed and suffered with friends and kinsmen.

Some Modern Historians have argued that it is the very essence of totalitarianism to suppress all transcendence. That is, to isolate man and destroy his ties to any idea or any institution--family, church, community--which gives him an identity that allows him to go beyond himself. So that he is totally dependent and totally malleable--like a piece of clay. Wittingly or unwittingly the demands of the state and the corporation in our society are increasingly destroying transcendence. That is why what we have to offer is of upmost important.

Our people have the creativity, talent and the intelligence and our community increasingly has the maturity and the resources to make a significant contribution in the last third of this century. Drawing now on the most humane and generous ideals of our heritage we need only to formulate the vision which will lead us to our rendezvous with greatness.